

Theognis of Megara

Translated by Gregory Nagy

Lord Apollo, son of Leto and Zeus, I will always have you

2 on my mind as I begin and as I end my song.

You will be my song in the beginning, in the end, and in the middle.

4 Hear my prayer and grant me the things that are noble [*esthla*].

Lord Phoebus Apollo! When the goddess, Lady Leto, gave birth to you

6 at the wheel-shaped lake, you O most beautiful of the immortal gods,

as she held on to the Palm Tree with her supple hands,

8 then it was that all Delos, indescribably and eternally, was filled

with an aroma of immortality; and the Earth smiled in all her enormity,

10 while the deep *pontos* of the gray Sea rejoiced.

Artemis, killer of beasts, daughter of Zeus! For you Agamemnon

12 established a sacred precinct at the time when he set sail for Troy with his swift ships.

Hear my prayer! Ward off the spirits of destruction!

14 For you this is a small thing to do, goddess. For me it is a big thing.

¹⁵ Muses and Graces [*Kharites*], daughters of Zeus! You were the ones

16 who once came to the wedding of Kadmos, and you sang this beautiful *epos*:

¹⁷ "What is beautiful [*kalon*] is near and dear [*philon*], what is not beautiful [*kalon*] is not near and dear [*philon*]."

18 That is the *epos* that came through their immortal mouths.

Kyrnos, let a seal be placed by me as I practice my *sophiā*

20 upon these *epea*; that way they will never be stolen without detection,

and no one will substitute something inferior for the good [*esthlon*] that is there.

22 And everyone will say: "These are the *epea* of Theognis
of Megara. His name is known among all men."

24 But I am not yet able to please all the citizens.

Which is not surprising, son of Polypaos! Not even Zeus

26 can please everyone either by making rain or by withdrawing rain.

But I, having good intentions toward you, will give you the kind of advice

28 that I myself, Kynos, learned from the *agathoi* when I was still a boy.

Be aware! Do not drag the things of *tīmē* or *aretē* or wealth

30 in the direction of deeds that are base and shameful or without *dikē*.

³⁹ Kynos, this city [*polis*] is pregnant, and I fear that it will give birth to a man

40 who will be a straightener [*euthuntēr*] of our base *hubris*.

⁴¹ The citizens [*astoi*] here [in the city] are still moderate [*sōphrones*], but the
leaders [*hēgemones*]

42 have veered so far as to fall into debasement [*kakotēs*].

⁴³ Men who are noble [*agathoi*], Kynos, have never yet ruined any city [*polis*],

44 but when people who are base [*kakoi*] decide to behave with *hubris*,

⁴⁵ and when they ruin the community [*dēmos*] and render judgments [*dikai*] in
favor of the unjust [= persons or things without *dikē*],

46 for the sake of private gain [*kerdos* plural], and for the sake of absolute power
[*kratos*],

⁴⁷ do not expect that city [*polis*] to be peaceful for long,

48 not even if it is now in a state of great serenity [*hēsukhiā*],

⁴⁹ once the base [*kakoi*] decide on these things,

50 namely, private gains [*kerdos* plural] entailing public damage.

⁵¹ From these things result acts of discord [*stasis* plural], killings [*phonoí*] within local groups of men,

52 and one-man rulers [*mounarkhoi*]. May this city [*polis*] never decide to accept these things!

My *thūmos*! Keep turning and showing a new side of your versatile nature in each encounter with every *philos*.

214 Keep mixing your temperament to match that of each *philos*.

Have the temperament of a complex octopus,

216 who always looks like whatever rock he has just clung to.

Now be like this; then, at another time, become someone else in your coloring.

218 It is true to say that *sophiā* is better than being *atropos*.¹

I gave you wings with which over the boundless sea [*pontos*]

238 you will fly, soaring, and over all the earth,

with ease. You will be there at all banquets,

240 on the lips of many,

and young men will sing of you to the accompaniment of clear-sounding pipes,

242 delightful young men, in good arrangement [*kosmos*], beautifully and clearly.

And when you go under, down to the recesses of dark Earth

244 to the mournful halls of Hādēs,

you will never, not even in death, lose *kleos*, but you will be on the minds of men,

246 having a name that is unwilting [*aphthiton*] forever,
Kyrnos, as you go about the land of the Hellenes and over their islands too,
248 crossing the unharvested fish-swarming sea [*pontos*];
and this time you will not be sitting on horseback, but you will be propelled
250 by the splendid gifts of the violet-garlanded Muses.

You will be a song for everyone who has song on his mind, both for those who
are now and for those who will be,

252 so long as there will be Earth and Sun.

But I do not even get a little respect from you,

254 and you deceive me with your words as if I were some small boy.

May Zeus grant me repayment of the *philoī* who love me,

338 and that I may have more power than my personal enemies [*ekhthroī*].

Thus would I have the reputation of a god among men,

340 if my destined death overtakes me when I have exacted repayment.

O Zeus, Olympian, bring my timely prayer to its ultimate fulfillment!

342 Grant that I have something good happen in place of misfortunes.

But may I die if I find no respite from cares brought on by misfortunes.

344 And may I give harm in return for harm.

For this is the way it was destined, and yet I see no repayment on the horizon,

346 no repayment of the men who robbed me of my possessions by force [*biē*].
But I am a dog and I cross the stream

348 with its wintry torrent. I am about to exact repayment for everything.

May I drink their black blood! And may a noble [*esthlos*] *daimōn* look on at all

of this,

350 who may bring these things to their ultimate fulfillment, in accordance with my *noos*.

I fear, son of Polypaos, that *hubris* will destroy this *polis*

542 —the same *hubris* that destroyed the Centaurs, eaters of raw flesh.

I must render this *dikē*, Kyrnos, along the straight line of a carpenter's rule and square,

544 and I must give to both sides their equitable share,

with the help of seers, portents, and burning sacrifice,

546 so that I may not incur shameful blame for veering.

My *philoī* betray me. A personal enemy [*ekhthros*] would have been no problem, since I could steer clear of him,

576 much as a helmsman [*kubernētēs*] steers clear of the reefs in the sea.

Ah, wretched Poverty! Why do you weigh upon my shoulders

650 and debase both my body and my *noos*?

Forcibly and against my will, you teach me many base and shameful things,

652 though I am one among men who understands what things are *esthla* and beautiful.

If I had the wealth, Simonides, that I used to have,

668 I would not be distressed as I am now at being together with the *agathoi*.

But now my possessions have passed me by, even though I was aware, and I

am speechless

670 because of my lack of wealth, though I am aware of one single thing much better than many other things:

that we are now being carried along, with white sails lowered,

672 beyond the *pontos* of Melos, through the dark night,

and they refuse to bail, and the sea washes over

674 both sides of the ship. It is a difficult thing for anyone

to be saved, what with the things they are doing. They have deposed the *kubernētēs*,

676 the noble [*esthlos*] one, who was standing guard, with expertise.

They seize wealth by force [*biē*], and order [*kosmos*] has been destroyed.

678 There is no longer an equitable division of possessions, aimed at the collective interest,

but the carriers of merchandise rule, and the *kakoi* are on top of the *agathoi*.

Let these things be allusive utterances [*ainigma* pl.] hidden by me for the *agathoi*.

682 One could be aware of even future misfortune, if one is *sophos*.

A man who consults the Oracle must be more straight, Kyrnos, being on his guard,

806 than a carpenter's pin and rule and square

—a man to whom the priestess of the god at Delphi

808 makes a response, revealing a sacred utterance from the opulent shrine.

You will not find any remedy left if you add anything,

810 nor will you escape from veering, in the eyes of the gods, if you take anything away.

Everything here has gone to the ravens and perdition. And not

- 834 one of the immortal and blessed gods is responsible to us for this, Kyrnos,
but the violence [*biē*] of men and their baneful desire for gain [*kerdea*] and
their *hubris*
836 have plummeted them from much good [*agatha*] into debasement [*kakotēs*].

Often has this *polis*, because of the *kakotēs* of its leaders,

- 856 run aground like a veering ship.

¹⁰⁸¹ Kyrnos, this city [*polis*] is pregnant, and I fear that it will give birth to a man

- 1082 who will be a *hubristēs* [= perpetrator of *hubris*], a leader [*hēgemōn*] of dire
discord [*stasis*].

^{1082a} The citizens [*astoi*] here [in the city] are moderate [*sōphrones*], but the
leaders [*hēgemones*]

^{1082b} have veered so far as to fall into debasement [*kakotēs*].

hubris has destroyed the Magnesians and Kolophon

- 1104 and Smyrna; and it will completely destroy all of you, too, Kyrnos!

- 1123 Do not remind me of my misfortunes! The kinds of things that happened to
Odysseus have happened to me too.

- 1124 He came back, emerging from the great palace of Hādēs,
and then killed the suitors with a pitiless heart [*thūmos*].

- 1126 while thinking good thoughts about his duly wedded wife Penelope,

1127 who all along waited for him and stood by their dear son
1128 while he [= Odysseus] was experiencing dangers on land and in the gaping
chasms of the sea.

I heard, son of Polypaos, the sound of a bird making its resonant call,
1198 the bird that comes as a messenger of plowing for men,
plowing in season. And it roused my somber heart,
1200 for other men now possess my flowery fields,
and my mules no longer pull my curved plow
1202 all because of that other sea-voyage that is on one's mind.

I am Aithōn by birth, and I have an abode [*oikos*] in well-walled Thebes,
1210 since I have been exiled from my native land.

The Corpse of the Sea is now calling me home.
1230 It is dead, but it calls with a mouth that is alive.

Appendix to Theognis

1. And another person is taught by the Olympian Muses their gifts,
thus understanding the nature of delightful *sophiā*
And yet another person is made a seer by lord Apollo the efficacious,
and he is aware of a bad thing, even when it comes to a man from afar.

Solon F 13.51–54

2. In matters of great importance, it is difficult to please all.

Solon F 7

3. I wrote down the laws for *kakos* and *agathos* alike, fitting a straight *dikē* for each.

Solon F 36.18–20

4. But in an oligarchy, where many men are competing for *aretē* in public life, intense personal hatreds are bound to break out. For each of them wants to be on top and to have his proposals win the day, and so they end up having great hatreds against each other. From which arises strife [*stasis* pl.] from which in turn arises killing [*phonos*], from which in turn it all comes down to tyranny [*monarkhia*]*—*and in this there is proof for how superior is monarchy!

Herodotus 3.82.3

5. And we, men of overweening violence [*biē*], settled Kolophon, we leaders of baneful *hubris*.

Mimnermus F 9.3-4

6. But the *noos* of the leaders of the community [*dēmos*] is without *dikē*. What awaits them is the suffering of many pains because of a great *hubris*. For they do not understand how to check insatiability [*koros*], nor can they make *kosmos* for their existing merriment in the serenity [*hēsukhiā*] of the banquet. They are wealthy, swayed by deeds without *dikē*, and not caring at all about sacred or public property, they steal from one another by forcible seizure, and they do not heed the holy institutions of *dikē*, who silently observes the present and the past, and who will in the future come to exact complete retribution.

Solon F 4.7–16

7. It is difficult to hold down someone who has risen too far up, once it has happened, but now is the time for someone to take all precautions with his *noos*.

Solon F9.5–6

8. And along the road of the Prytaneion is the hero-precinct of Ino, and around it is an enclosure made of stones, and there are olive-trees on top of it. And the people of Megara are the only ones of the Greeks who say that the corpse of Ino was washed ashore on a beach in their territory, and that Klēsō and Tauropolis found it and gave it a funeral*—*they were the daughters of Klēsōn son of Lelex; they also say that Ino was called Leukothea [White Goddess] in their country first, and that they have a yearly sacrifice to her.

Pausanias 1.42.7

Notes

[[back](#)] **1.** That is, 'having no versatility, having no power to turn'; cf. Odysseus at *Od.* i 1 as *polutropos* 'having much versatility, having many ways to turn'.

2017-12-18